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# ACCENTS.

BY JAMES L. WHITNEY, BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY.

ACCENTS are often omitted on the title-pages of French books; it may be because the printer lacks a supply, or because they offend the eye when perched, like Stylites, on the tops of their capitals. Even in the text of otherwise carefully printed books the accent is sometimes not found on capital letters, as, for example, in the word *Égypte* in the *Grand Dictionnaire* of Larousse, where the accent appears in the heading and in the top line, but is omitted in the text. This may be because the lines are too closely spaced to allow room for the accents. I am told that in France in official signs, placards, and engraved specimens, capital letters are carefully accented without exception.

Whatever the reason may be for the omission of accents, whenever capitals are reduced to small letters in transcription, and whenever the accents are missing in the text, or are incorrect, they must be supplied or corrected.

The rules for the French accent are briefly stated in the dictionaries of Bescherelle and Littré. In Madame Duperré de Lisle's *Étude sur la prononciation française*, I find particulars not given in other books examined. Mätzner says in his *Französische Grammatik* that there is no comprehensive principle underlying their use. It is worth while to notice that the acute and grave accents as used on *e*, are signs giving it a full pronunciation, where otherwise it would be mute. No *é* or *è* is ever written unless, without the accent, the *e* would (by the rules of the preceding paragraph) have its mute value.\*

It will be found convenient to make a list of words often occurring whose accents are

puzzling, as *âge*, *ainé*, *apôtre*, *épître*, *évêque*, *extrême*, *gâter*, *gâteau*, *goût*, *grâce*, *hôpital*, *maître*, *impôt*, *rôle*, *sûr* (certain), *théâtre*, etc.

One trained in the classics, and blessed with a sixth sense—the linguistic sense—will often understand the reason for the appearance of an accent. He will know, for instance, from the history of a word, that a letter has dropped out which is replaced by a circumflex accent—a clamp, as it were, to bind the word together and keep it from falling to pieces, or an *s*, on its side, as some regard it, to denote that this letter has been knocked out flat upon its back, as *ç*.

In some cases, when there is no suppressed *s*, the reason for the use of the circumflex accent is not apparent. Littré says of the word *extrême*, just mentioned, that, as no *s* has disappeared, the grave accent would seem to be preferable to the circumflex, conformably to the custom that, when in derivatives the accent is acute (*extrémité*), the primitive is grave; as, for example, *problème*, *problématique*, *système*, *systématique*.

Sometimes a word will seem more familiar under a different accent from the one given it; and, on examination of the dictionaries, it will be found that the French appear to tire of their accents, as of their rulers and form of government, and to change them from time to time. In the seventh edition of the Dictionary of the Academy (1877) the following differences of accent will be found from the sixth edition (1835) and the Dictionary of Littré. All words in the earlier editions, written *-ège*, are found in the later *-ège*, as *collège*, *collège*; *cortège*, *cortège*; *liège* (cork), *liège*; *sacrilège*, *sacrilège*; *siège*, *siège*.

\* Whitney's French grammar, p. 6.

The following are among the changes which may be noted:—

*Academy's 6th edition and Littré. Academy's 7th edition.*

Affrètement.	Affrètement.
Avènement.	Avènement.

Yet the three dictionaries unite in the form *événement*.

Duodenum.	Duodénium.
Épitome.	Épitomé.
Fac-simile.	Fac-similé.
Fétoyer.	Festoyer, Fétoyer.
Gaîne.	Gaine.
Goître.	Goitre.
Orfévre.	Orfèvre.
Poème.	Poëme.
Sève.	Sève.
Tempêteux.	Tempétueux.
Ténement.	*Tènement.

Mätzner calls attention to the fact that the words *religion* and *religieux* lack the accent, while *irreligion* and *irreligieux* have it. This would seem like regarding the accent as "the mark of the beast."

Amid such a variety of usage the rule might be that when a missing accent needs to be supplied the latest edition of the Dictionary of the Academy is to be followed. French writers and printers will be likely, after more or less grumbling and protestation, to follow this standard.† If the decision of the Academy appears in any case to be unwise, other authorities might be followed, provided one remembers to be consistent. If in a title an accent is found which is a little old-fashioned, it is not worth while to change it to make it agree with the dictum of the Academy; as, for example, if the form *poème* is given, do not change it to *poëme*. Of course, the titles

\*The majority of cases of changes from *é* to *è* occur before a mute syllable; in truth, it is highly desirable that the change be extended to all similar cases, and I would venture the suggestion that in all doubtful, if not in all, cases, preference should be given to the grave accent unless etymology suggests the circumflex.—*Professor J. Luquiens in a letter to the writer.*

† French printers have perhaps excelled those of all other nations in their ambition to perfect their art. The publications of Didot and other French printers will repay study. Lefèvre's "Guide pratique du compositeur et de l'imprimeur typographe, Nouvelle édition," Paris, 1883, is a helpful book. This praise must be qualified in the case of modern French novels.

of early printed French books are to be let alone, or handled with extreme caution.

Words which differ in form in French from the corresponding ones in English may to advantage be kept before the eye, such as *adresser, apothicaire, civilisation, correspondant, exemple, indépendance, littérature, médecine*, etc. Even a short list of this kind will be found to be very useful, for one is surprised to see how limited is the vocabulary of title-pages, or, at least, how often the words entered in such a list will recur. The same is true in German books.\*

In Whitney's French grammar it is stated that "it is just as great a fault in writing French to leave off the accent, or to write a word with a wrong accent, as to leave out a letter or to write a wrong letter." This would be a severe test to apply to Spanish books, so often do they omit the accent where the rules appear to require it. But recently printed Spanish books seem to show extreme care and nicety in the use of accents and an almost faultless typography.

When the accent or stress of voice falls on certain syllables in Spanish, the written accent is not needed. When a vowel is at the end of a word, or a diphthong ending in *a, e, and o*, the penult generally receives the stress of voice, certain adverbs and persons of the verb, etc., being exceptions. Where the last letter is a consonant (except in plural words and in certain tenses of verbs), or is a diphthong ending in *i*, the stress is generally placed on the last syllable. The written accent is not required in these cases, but is reserved for those cases which are exceptions to this rule; for words which are spelled alike, but differ in meaning and use; for vowels in certain combinations, etc.

These rules are mentioned as being of the most common application, without attempting to go further into the subject. The Grammar of the Spanish Academy in its latest edition gives a fresh treatment of the subject, but, as

\* One familiar with German books comes to expect certain airy and elongated words in the titles, at least of serious books. The following will be recognized as a typical German title: "Entwicklungsgeschichte des Eigenthums unter cultur geschichtlichem und wirthschaftlichem Gesichtspunkte."



it seems to me, a foreigner is not able easily to comprehend the subject with clearness and definiteness, or understand the diversities of usage, from which not even the different publications of the Spanish Academy are free. For example, recently printed Spanish books place an accent on the last syllable of substantives ending in *on*, as *acción*, *contestación*, etc. In this they follow the latest edition of the Dictionary of the Academy, while earlier editions omit the accent in such cases. Again, in words like *examen* and *orden*, which formerly had the accent, it is now omitted. In either case I can see no reason for the change. The first is provided for in the rule already mentioned in regard to words ending in a consonant, and in the second the written ac-

cent is needed because it is an exception to the same rule.

Only a close study of the language will give facility in the use of the accent. It will be necessary to keep a dictionary close at hand and to prepare a list like the one suggested for French words. An examination of carefully printed books will be found helpful.

Care must be taken not to omit the accent in Italian, where it is used to distinguish words of the same form but different meanings, as *dì* (of) and *di* (day); *e* (and) and *è* (is); *amo* (I love) and *amò* (he loved). Sometimes the Italian printer forgets the accent.

The titles of Greek books, it is needless to say, must be printed in lower case letters and accented.







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